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Language at preschool in Europe: Early years professionals in the spotlight

Abstract: Over the past few decades early years education throughout Europe has experienced many changes due to higher numbers of children attending centres for early childhood education and care (ECEC), a growing linguistic and cultural diversity in society and a shift from care to education with the focus on preparing children for entry to primary school. These changes have brought with them an expectation from policy makers, researchers and parents for better ECEC. Language support for children is often named as one of the key aspects of high-quality childcare because of its importance in successful entry to and progression within the future educational career of a child. However, rather little is known about how early years professionals meet the linguistic demands of twenty-first century multilingual Europe. The present special issue tries to fill this gap by giving a platform to five European investigations into language at preschool in Europe with a focus on early years educators' competences, knowledge, skills, beliefs and needs. This introductory article aims to prepare the reader for the contributions that follow in this special issue. We first describe current policy and practice of language support in European ECEC with regard to children's and educators' needs. Then, we review all the contributions and provide a summary focusing on the diversity as well as the commonalities of the five investigations, before formulating an outlook for future work.

Keywords: early years education, linguistic development, professionalism, earlychildhood education and care (ECEC), plurilingualism

Samenvatting: In de afgelopen decennia heeft de voor- en vroegschoolse educatie (vve) in heel Europa grote veranderingen ondergaan. Dit komt doordat er meer kinderen deelnemen aan de vve, de talige en culturele diversiteit in de maatschappij toeneemt en doordat de vve steeds vaker niet alleen verantwoordelijk is voor zorg maar ook voor educatie, d.w.z. kinderen voorbereiden op school. Deze veranderingen hebben tot gevolg dat beleidsmakers, onderzoekers en ouders verwachten dat de vve kwalitatief hoogwaardig is. Vanwege het grote belang voor de schoolcarrière van een kind wordt taalsteun voor kinderen met een risico op achterstand vaak genoemd als één van de belangrijkste kenmerken van hoogwaardige vve. Tot op heden weten we echter weinig over in hoeverre pedagogisch medewerkers in de vve voldoen aan de talige verwachtingen van Europa in de 21e eeuw. Dit themanummer probeert om dit gat te vullen door een platform

te bieden aan vijf Europese onderzoeken naar taal in de vve met bijzondere aandacht voor de competenties, kennis, vaardigheden en behoeftes van de pedagogisch medewerkers. Deze introductie biedt de lezer een beeld van wat aan de orde komt in de hierop volgende artikelen van dit themanummer. We beginnen met een overzicht van Europees beleid en praktijk op het gebied van taalsteun in de vve in aansluiting op de behoeftes van kinderen en pedagogisch medewerkers. Daarna geven we een korte samenvatting van de verschillende bijdrages in dit tijdschrift waarbij we zowel de verschillen als ook de overeenkomsten in beschouwing nemen. We sluiten af met suggesties voor toekomstig onderzoek.

Zusammenfassung: In den vergangenen Jahrzehnten hat sich die frühkindliche Bildung (FB) in ganz Europa stark geändert. Dies liegt zum einen daran, dass immer mehr Kinder das frühkindliche Versorgungsangebot nutzen während auch die sprachliche und kulturelle Vielfalt in der Gesellschaft wächst. Zum anderen hat sich die FB immer mehr weg von Spiel und Erziehung hin zur Bildung, d. h. zur Vorbereitung von Kindern für den Schuleintritt, entwickelt. Diese Änderungen haben dafür gesorgt, dass Politik, Forschung und Eltern gleichermaßen hohe Erwartungen an die Qualität der FB haben. Da der Sprachstand in der Bildungssprache für den Schulstart und den weiteren Bildungsweg eines Kindes besonders wichtig ist, wird Sprachförderung für Kinder mit einem erhöhten Risiko für sprachliche Defizite oft als eines der wichtigsten Merkmale von qualitativer FB genannt. Jedoch ist zurzeit nur in geringem Maße bekannt, inwiefern pädagogische Fachkräfte der FB in der Lage sind, die Erwartungen des 21. Jahrhunderts im Bereich Sprache zu erfüllen. Diese Sonderausgabe versucht, diese Lücke zu füllen, indem es fünf europäische Forschungsprojekte zu Sprache in der FB mit besonderer Aufmerksamkeit für die Kompetenzen, Kenntnisse, Fähigkeiten und Bedürfnisse von pädagogischen Fachkräften in einem Heft zusammenfasst. In diesem einleitenden Artikel geben wir zunächst eine Übersicht über die politischen Vorgaben und die herrschende Praxis der Sprachförderung in der europäischen FB mit Blick für die Bedürfnisse der Kinder und pädagogischen Fachkräfte. Danach fassen wir die einzelnen Beiträge in diesem Sonderheft zusammen und erarbeiten die Unterschiede sowie die Gemeinsamkeiten der Artikel. Schließlich benennen wir Ideen und Wege für zukünftige Forschung.

Resumen: A lo largo de las últimas décadas la educación en los primeros años de vida ha experimentado numerosos cambios en toda Europa debido al elevado número de niños que asisten a centros de educación y cuidados en la infancia (ECI), a la creciente diversidad lingüística y cultural en la sociedad y al cambio de paradigma de la atención a la educación con el énfasis en preparar a los niños para su acceso a la escuela primaria. Estos cambios han traído como consecuen-

cia que existan mayores expectativas por parte de los legisladores, los investigadores y los padres para un mejor ECI. El apoyo lingüístico para los niños se considera a menudo como uno de los aspectos cruciales de una educación de alta calidad puesto que tendrá una gran importancia en el éxito tanto en el acceso del niño a su futura carrera educativa como en su progreso en ella. Sin embargo, sabemos muy poco sobre si los profesionales de esa etapa educativa reúnen las exigencias lingüísticas de la Europa multilingüe del siglo XXI. El presente monográfico intenta llenar ese vacío proporcionando una plataforma para cinco trabajos de investigación europeos acerca de la lengua en la etapa de educación infantil en Europa prestando especial atención a las competencias, el conocimiento, las estrategias, las creencias y las necesidades de los educadores de esa etapa educativa. Este artículo introductorio pretende preparar al lector para las contribuciones que aparecen en el monográfico. Primero describimos la política y la práctica actual sobre apoyo lingüístico en centros ECI europeos con respecto a las necesidades de los niños y de los educadores. Después analizamos todas las contribuciones y proporcionamos un resumen en el que nos centramos en la diversidad y las similitudes de las cinco antes de formular una perspectiva de trabajo que ha de realizarse en un futuro.

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1 Introduction

Early years education has experienced great change in the past few decades. Firstly, there are growing numbers of children attending early childhood education and care (ECEC) and many start at an earlier age (0 to 3 years) due to the higher labour force participation of women (Eurostat 2012; Kamerman 2000). Secondly, socio-economic and political developments have created a Europe of 'super-diversity' as coined by Vertovec (2006), that is, early years education has seen increased numbers of children with a migrant background – often in combination with a different home language and culture than the language used in education. Thirdly, the traditional focus of early years' institutions on play and care has shifted towards early childhood education, that is, preparing toddlers for school entrance (Kamerman 2000). These changes have culminated in calls for high-quality early childhood education – an issue raised by researchers, policy makers and parents alike (Goodman and Sianesi 2005; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre

and Pianta 2008; Whitebook and Ryan 2011). Probably one of the most important aspects of qualitatively higher early years education is assigned to linguistic support for all those in need, e.g., children with a different language background or those with special language and communication needs (SLCN).

This special issue presents a collection of articles that all address language at preschool and that pay specific attention to the role of early years professionals and their efforts to provide high-quality childcare in linguistically challenging contexts of super-diversity, plurilingualism and SLCN. The contributions stem from five different European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). This volume does not claim to provide a representative country-specific overview of language support in European ECEC, but rather we paint a picture showing the existing diversity. This is due to the fact that early years education in many EU countries lies outside (i.e., before) compulsory education and is regulated at regional (and not national) levels (Eurostat 2012). Accordingly, support for child language development and training for ECEC staff is regularly based on local, small-scale initiatives. Furthermore, the articles describe ECEC professionals that take care of children of very diverse age groups, e.g., from 0–2;6 years in the Belgian contribution, from 2;6–6;6 in the French and German example, from 2;6–6;0 in the Netherlands and from 3 to 5 years in the UK article. Finally, because the authors of this volume represent a variety of scientific backgrounds (e.g., sociolinguistic experts on intercultural education; education specialists on SCLN) they have taken different content and methodological approaches to address the topic of language at preschool. Consequently, each paper analyses a very specific and often local perspective. The aim of this volume as a whole is to demonstrate the diversity that exists with regard to (a) policy and institutionalised measures for language support in ECEC; (b) expectations and training of early years professionals for assisting children with linguistic needs; and (c) ways to perform research in this area. What unifies the contributions is their attention to the important role ECEC staff play for the language development of the children they take care of – and especially of those who need language support.

Interestingly, often no clear data are available for the exact number of children in early years education who would benefit from language support. To draw a tentative picture, we present here the number of children with a migrant background in primary and secondary education.[1] Importantly, these figures are based on ethnic origin (and not language background) of the pupils and their parents so

1 Although no direct match between the elder children and toddlers who attend preschool exists, it is likely that the numbers given roughly mirror each other because the 10 and 15 year olds have also been in need for early childhood education and care – be it (more than) ten years ago.

that they provide an even less clear picture. The European Union reports that in 2009 on average 9.3% of the 15 year olds in education have a migrant background (Eurostat 2012). However, large differences exist among and within the individual member states of the EU. For example, in many central European countries the numbers are as low as 0.3% (Slovak Republic) and 2.2% (Hungary) for both the 5 to 9 year and the 10 to 14 year olds (Eurostat 2012) and 0.7% (Slovak Republic) and 1.7% (Hungary) for the 15 year olds (OECD 2013b). The percentages for countries covered in this special issue are all above the European average (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of age groups of children with a migrant background (1st or 2nd generation) in the countries covered in this special issue

country age group	EU	Belgium	France	Germany	Netherlands	UK
5–9 year olds[a]	x	6.6	4.5	2.8	3.3	5.7
10–14 year olds[a]	x	8.4	3.5	4.3	4.9	6.5
15 year olds[b]	9.3[c]	15.1	13.2[c]	13.1	10.6	12.7

Note: [a] Eurostat 2012, figures based on children born abroad (for younger age groups no EU numbers available); [b] OECD 2013b, figures based on students' self-report data on immigrant status in the PISA 2012 results; [c] Eurostat 2012, figures based on PISA 2009 results – data from PISA 2012 not available for EU average and France.

Local reports reveal further extremes. For example, in the German city of Essen 28% of primary school children grow up with more than one language (Thürmann et al. 2010) while in the Dutch capital Amsterdam 56% of secondary school children have a non-Dutch origin (Bureau Onderzoek en Statistiek Amsterdam 2012; see also Young this issue for figures in the French city of Strasbourg). These examples suggest that, especially in urban contexts, for many children the language dominating at home may not be the same as the language spoken at school.[2] Often, the use of another language at home coincides with a low socio-economic status of the parents (Stanat and Christensen 2006). Based on recently

2 We focus here explicitly on multilingual immigrant children but would like to raise awareness to two side notes: First, even if a child is raised in the majority language there may be large differences between the sociolectal or dialectal variety spoken at home and the one dominant at school. Second, the difference between home and school variety presumably is larger at higher

published PISA 2012 results the OECD (2013a: 104) states: "parents' job status, immigrant background and the language spoken at home are not only associated with performance differences, they are also interlinked. [... and] although poor performance in school does not automatically stem from socio-economic disadvantage, the socio-economic status of students and schools does appear to have a powerful influence on learning outcomes." Accordingly, it may very well be that children with a migrant background are at risk of displaying a low language proficiency level in the schooling language when they enter primary education.

A disadvantageous start can have a strong impact on a child's future educational and professional career (Blossfeld and Shavit 2011; Dickinson 2011; Goodman and Sianesi 2005). As subject matter is taught by means of language, low levels of school language proficiency form a substantial hurdle, which may prevent children from attaining higher forms of education and/or obtaining higher qualified jobs after their school career (Schleppegrell 2004). A good command of the schooling language at entry to primary school, therefore, is imperative. But, what are successful ways to prepare children for their educational career, in particular, regarding their (second) language skills at the earliest years of development before they enter school?

This special issue focuses on language development during early childhood in Europe by highlighting the institutionalised support children need and should receive in early years education and care. Special attention will be given to the competences, knowledge, beliefs, and skills as well as the needs of early years professionals with regard to foster young children's language acquisition. The emphasis lies on the linguistic (and socio-cultural) challenges child caregivers are faced with – especially in multilingual urban contexts. The issue brings together scholars from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK who investigated early childhood educators' ways of dealing with language and the related needs of the children they care for in their daily work. The contributions identify problems and needs in European ECEC with respect to policy and legislation as well as in current practice and support for children and professionals in early years education. Not least, the articles present a range of initiatives and approaches to meet the needs of ECEC professionals in their efforts to linguistically support the children under their supervision.

This introductory article will provide a framework for the contributions following in the remainder of this issue. We will highlight the role of language in early childhood education with a focus on early years professionals working in a

levels of education (e.g., secondary school) than at initial levels. As a reviewer pointed out, in ECEC and primary education dialectal and social varieties are in regular use.

world of super-diversity and social inequality. We start by contrasting the multilingual reality in many (urban) contexts (2.1) with the monolingual (or towards English-only biased multilingual, cf. Vetter 2013) policies of most European countries (2.2). Given the heightened awareness for the needs of language learning children in the educational system, policy and practice seem to have started to adapt to the changes more recently – be it at a slow pace – as reviewed in section 2.3. We then give details of policy makers' and parents' growing linguistic expectations of high quality childcare (2.4) before we address the related needs of early years professionals (2.5). In section 3 we will briefly introduce the contributions to this special issue by outlining the content, methodological approach and main findings of each text. In section 4, we will summarise the differences and commonalities of the work presented here.

As mentioned earlier, the contributions to this volume cover a variety of approaches. As a result, not all aspects identified in this introduction will be (equally) taken up by the subsequent articles. That is, some texts provide details on the specific issues that reflect the expertise of the respective author(s) only. Therefore, the reader may at times feel that there is a tension regarding content. For example, while this introduction advocates the importance of generating a positive attitude towards emergent plurilingualism and to foster home language development, some contributions emphasise the provision of effective language training in the majority language in ECEC in order to prepare children for a smooth entry to compulsory schooling (Ofner and Thoma; Kuiken this volume) or they talk about children with SLCN and do not address plurilingualism (Mroz and Letts this volume). Currently, this contrast presumably is one of the most apparent challenges for early years professionals in Europe. That is, how can ECEC provide both support for home language development and sufficient input in the schooling language? This question in particular is vital given the fact that in some European countries ECEC staff hold minimal levels of education and may be overwhelmed by this dual task. The contributions to this special issue show – despite or due to their diversity in focus and methodology – how current initiatives have made an initial step in adding to the growing expertise of early years professionals with regard to language at preschool in Europe.

2 Language in early childhood education in Europe

2.1 Multilingual reality in Europe

Twenty-first century Europe is characterised by linguistic super-diversity of its population; this is especially the case in urban centres (Vertovec 2006). On the one hand, this multicompositionality is based on geographic location, local historic development and urbanisation processes as in the case of Brussels (van Gorp and Moons this volume) or Strasbourg (Young this volume). On the other hand, several migratory waves have been central in bringing about this diversity. During the second half of the 20th century, migration to a particular country tended to come from a limited number of particular home countries or regions, creating a comparatively homogeneous group of immigrants, e.g., from former colonies like the Maghreb in France or Indonesia in the Netherlands and from typical working migrant states like the Mediterranean countries (e.g., Turkey, Greece, Morocco). From 1990 on, however, migration became more diverse. Political developments (the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Balkan wars, the expansion of the European Union), global inequality and sustained poverty (African countries and Asia), as well as globalisation, and increased possibilities for mobility, all had an effect on the composition of modern European society (Extramiana and van Avermaat 2011).

Today, European cities show high numbers of inhabitants with a different culture and language than the national culture(s) and language(s) of the country. Many second and third generation inhabitants (descendants from the working migrants in the 1960s) carry a sociocultural and linguistic heritage and often the diversity has become a mixture of the historically existing local variation (of dialectal and autochthonous minorities) with the arrival of new citizens from abroad (including European and other languages).

The multilingual and multicultural background becomes apparent in the educational system, where children come to school speaking another language or language variety and have grown up with a different culture at home than the one they are confronted with at school. In Amsterdam, for example, more than 50% of the inhabitants are of non-Dutch origin, while the number of pupils with a migrant background at school is around 60% (Kuiken this volume). Similar figures hold for urban centres in Belgium, England, France and Germany and other European countries that are not represented in this special issue (Thürmann et al. 2010; Vetter 2013).

Consequently, for several decades multilingual learners have been present at all levels of European education: from early years' childcare through to primary and secondary school up to vocational training and tertiary studies. Vetter (2013: 91) argues that this "[f]luidity, variability and rapid change [of society] call for flexible and locally embedded solutions, which of course contain global processes – in line with the nature of super-diversity." But it is only in the last ten years, that multi- and plurilingualism has received attention from European (educational) policy makers.

2.2 Educational language policy in Europe

In its own words, the European Union claims to promote "policies which strengthen linguistic diversity and language rights, deepen mutual understanding, consolidate democratic citizenship and sustain social cohesion" (Council of Europe 2012a). In 2003 the European Commission set its aim to ensure that every citizen should, in addition to the mother tongue, "master at least two foreign languages, with the emphasis on effective communicative ability" (European Commission 2003: 8). Traditionally, the target languages of EU multilingualism policy were those of the other member states, e.g., French, English, German, Italian, Dutch and more recently those spoken by local minorities, e.g., Welsh and Gaelic in the UK, Frisian in the Netherlands. For many years, EU policy completely ignored the existing linguistic repertoire of its migrant population – and so have many member states (McPake et al. 2007; Vetter 2013). By contrast, European countries expected multilingual citizens and children to 'neglect' their home language and culture. Immigrants should adopt the nationally dominant language as fast as possible in order to enhance assimilation into the country that they were living in.

However, this *monolingual habitus* (Gogolin 1994) in a multilingual society did not have the effect policy makers aimed at, that is, successful 'integration of new citizens'. On the contrary, educational, linguistic and social research into child language development has shown that second language competence is not hindered when the first language of a child is valued and recognised and that a child's general cognitive abilities and other subject matter learning as well as emotional factors benefit from a bilingual approach (Bialystok 2001; Bialystok and Martin 2004; Cummins 1978, 2008; Pearson et al. 1993; Schwartz and Shaul 2013; Han 2010; Han and Huang 2010).

However, it was not until the 2003 Action Plan that the European Union acknowledged the positive value of minority languages of migrants and welcomed linguistic diversity. Currently, the official website of the EU states that the "education systems need to ensure the harmonious development of learners'

plurilingual competence through a coherent, transversal and integrated approach that takes into account all the languages in learners' plurilingual repertoire and their respective functions." (Council of Europe 2012b). A policy the EU has brought into practice is its support for projects like "The languages of schooling", which focuses on effective linguistic development in the language of instruction due to its vital role across the whole curriculum (Council of Europe 2014). This project explicitly states that the instruction language may very well be the second language of children who, therefore, need extra support. A further aim of the current EU policy is to raise Europeans' awareness of their existing linguistic repertoire and to help them to synergistically draw on the knowledge and skills of all their languages and language varieties in order to become fully competent – linguistically and interculturally – members of the plurilingual European society.

However, some individual member states of Europe have not (yet) adopted a positive attitude towards pluri- and multilingualism. At times, this is related to the complex socio-political context the local linguistic landscape creates, like for example in Flanders (van Gorp and Moons this volume). In other cases a strong centralist governmental tradition puts emphasis on the national language only (as could be argued for France, cf. Young this volume). At lower governmental levels, though, many urban centres and educational units have realized that there is a need for a combined approach, which aims at positive synergies of emergent bilingualism and cognitive development because this is most beneficial for future educational and career success.

The articles in the present issue show different examples of how researchers and practitioners work together in an attempt to create more effective training of the school language with the acknowledgment of home languages as a resource (e.g., van Gorp and Moons; Young both this volume).[3] One trend in recent years has been that these initiatives have 'wandered down' the educational ladder. That is, language support programmes that traditionally aimed at school children more and more target infants and toddlers during the earliest years of their development, i.e., at nurseries, preschools and kindergarten.

3 Some of the articles presented in this issue seem to target school language support only and, therefore, risk reinforcing the 'monolingual habitus' themselves (e.g., Kuiken; Ofner and Thoma; this issue). It must be seen, however, that these contributions illustrate a subset of the many projects the authors have been involved with. For example, Ofner and Thoma work within the larger project *SprachKoPF* that as a whole aims to increase early years professionals' competences – including their knowledge about and attitudes towards multilingualism and rejects the 'deficit perspective'.

2.3 Needs of language learning children

For most children, learning their mother tongue (L1) is a natural step in their early years development. Also growing up with two (or three) languages does not create a problem for most children. Given equal amounts of input and interaction, they are likely to successfully acquire both their mother tongues and become balanced bilinguals.

In reality, however, it is unlikely that children receive equal amounts of input in both the languages they learn. Often, one of the languages is more dominant. For example, when parents both speak a different language at home but one of them is the main carer, children receive more input in the language of the person they spend most time with. In other cases, the language at home may differ from the language outside home. Young children, who spend most of their early years at home, will only occasionally have access to the outside-language. Their home language is likely to become their dominant one. Presumably, we do more right for these children when we consider them as successively learning an L1 (at home) and only later a second language (L2) e.g., in preschool or kindergarten. That is, we may treat them as child L2 learners of the language dominant in the school context.

Similarly, many children grow up in situations in which the language variety they acquire at home differs from the variety they would need for school. In this sense, Cummins (1979) differentiates Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) from Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While BICS enable daily fluent conversation in a social environment, the school context requires CALP, the language of argumentation, reasoning and other higher order cognitive skills (Bloom 1956; Cummins et al. 2012; Ní Ríordáin and O'Donoghue 2008). Children whose parents have a lower socio-economic status (SES) are at risk of not well developing CALP at home (Cummins 1984). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, OECD 2006) finds SES to be the most important factor that affects reading skills among fifteen year olds – and reading skills are strongly related to reading socialisation and literacy practices modelled to the child be it at home or at school. Recent results from PISA 2012 confirm this picture: "Socio-economically advantaged students and schools tend to outscore their disadvantaged peers by larger margins than between any other two groups of students" (OECD 2013a: 34). Cummins et al. (2012) have shown that children growing up with a different language at home may be able to acquire conversational fluency (BICS) in the dominant language within one to two years, but to learn the use of the decontextualized and abstract academic repertoire (CALP) of a new language, which is essential for persistent school success, is a much more effortful process that may take five years or more.

Finally, there are children with specific language and communication needs (SLCN) due to health issues that prevent them from seemingly effortless language acquisition at the usual pace. Also these children are at risk of not having developed the necessary language skills by the age of five or six, which may hinder successful acquisition of reading and writing at primary school with long-standing effects on later literacy and academic language skills (Mroz and Letts this volume).

For many European children, especially, in urban centres, the two factors of being a second language learner and having parents with a low socio-economic background coincide. Sometimes, these are even combined with SLCN. For these children, it is too late if their first intensive encounters with the language of schooling happen at entry to primary school. Research has shown that children with a language delay at the beginning of school almost never manage to catch up during their later educational career (Hart and Risley 2003; Marulis and Neuman 2010). Worse even, often these differences grow over time and strongly affect learning in other subject matter (Schleppegrell 2004). This has led to general advice based on the PISA studies that in "countries where the range of social backgrounds among the student population is the greatest, there may be a case for concentrating resources on disadvantaged children or their schools to help provide a learning environment that helps compensate for lower resources in the home" (OECD 2006: 6).

Preschool and other forms of early childhood education is seen as one of the places where children can receive this compensation, i.e., a place where they will be immersed in the essential language learning environment. However, even though many young children nowadays attend early childcare centres and a myriad of programmes to provide language support were financed and implemented by local and national governments in recent years, the rate of success is not always as high as intended (see e.g. Driessen 2012). One reason may be that second language acquisition requires more than immersion and intensive input. Thirty years of research provides ample evidence that at a young age children benefit from ontogenetically structured and interactionally modified input and output practices that support the co-construction of knowledge (Dannenbauer 1997; Swain and Lapkin 1995; Vygotsky 1999). In other words, children learn most, if they work and play with effective material that is adapted to the state of a child's current linguistic knowledge and builds upon and supports their existing (L1) knowledge and skills. Embedded in a motivational and affective context, e.g., by means of positive attitudes towards the home culture and language, child L2 learning can be very successful.

Consequently, to be able to give a child effective language support, requires knowledge about child language development and expertise on pedagogic beha-

viour and tools for (second) language acquisition (Hopp, Thoma, and Tracy 2010). This can only be expected from appropriately trained and informed early childhood professionals. The studies presented in this issue suggest that currently many early childcare givers may not be able to live up to these expectations.

2.4 Early years educators are faced with growing expectations

Based on the manifold changes in early childhood education and care (ECEC), today, an institution providing ECEC is expected to provide effective support in child development in several domains including language, motor skills, early science and musical ability as well as social-emotional and behavioural skills (Piasta et al. 2012). In particular, establishing rich language learning environments (van Gorp and Moons this volume) has received focal interest because of its fundamental value for literacy and the educational career in general (Dickinson 2011; Roulstone et al. 2011). In line with this, the Council of Europe (2008) has also emphasised language as an important domain for ECEC.

As can be seen in the contributions to this issue, many national, regional and local authorities reflect the focus on early language and literacy development in their policies. In order to support academic and second language acquisition during early years, large efforts have been made throughout Europe to create language programmes and materials for infants and toddlers (e.g., Lisker 2010). Similarly, governments have started to systematically assess the language skills of children at an early age in order to identify those at risk of delay (cf. UK screenings as reported in Mroz and Letts this issue). In some countries, ECEC institutions are expected to prepare toddlers for reading and literacy by creating rich language learning environments and train academic language skills (i.e., CALP in terms of Cummins 1979; van Gorp and Moons this issue), early years professionals are required to provide language training for children at risk (cf. German Federal State Baden-Württemberg, Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport 2006) or screen the abilities of individual children in order to identify special needs for children with a language delay (Mroz and Hall 2003; Mroz and Letts this volume).

Interestingly, there seems to be no evidence whether institutions providing ECEC are able to meet these expectations. This question is particularly intriguing because the duties of early years professionals stand in contrast to what can reasonably be expected from them.

2.5 Needs of early years educators

Currently, the level of training required for staff working in ECEC differs greatly across Europe. Institutionalised EU pre-primary education "must employ staff with specialised qualifications in education" (Eurostat 2012: 69). While the majority of EU countries require a Bachelor's degree for ECEC staff, at least one country presented in this volume forms an exception to this rule: in Germany "the minimum level of initial teacher qualification is either upper secondary or non-tertiary post-secondary level [though first BA degrees emerge, cf. Ofner and Thoma this issue]. Conversely, a master's degree is required in France" (Eurostat 2012: 110–111). These requirements, however, hold for institutionalised ECEC for children between three and five years old. Early years professionals who take care of younger children fall outside these guidelines and some European countries are satisfied with lower levels of education. Significantly, most training programmes for ECEC staff lack specific attention to language support in their curricula (cf. Kuiken; Mroz and Letts; Ofner and Thoma; Young; all this issue). A decade ago, UK-based researchers called for attention as "[...] the knowledge, skills, and training needs of early-years-professionals in relation to children's speech and language development" (Mroz and Hall 2003: 117) have not been identified in any systematic way. More recently, Dickinson (2011: 964) came to a similar conclusion: "Although preschool programs have had some success in meeting children's needs, many have failed to help teachers' language-enhancing practices that are needed to bolster language learning."

A few recent studies have focused on early childhood educators' knowledge, skills and needs though. The general finding of this research is that there is a great deal of diversity among early years professionals (Faas 2010; Fried 2008; Michel et al. 2014; Ofner and Thoma this volume). That is, some professionals do feel well equipped and are able to demonstrate effective linguistic behaviour when taking care of children in need. However, many lack the required knowledge and skills to provide language support and feel overwhelmed by the linguistic and intercultural expectations and duties they are faced with.

In sum, more attention is required for the needs of educators in twenty-first century ECEC with regard to the language development of children they take care of. More research into early years professionals' beliefs, knowledge base and practices will help us to improve the initial training of the early years workforce as well as to build effective coaching of in-service educators. The articles presented in this special issue have exactly this aim. Researchers from five different European countries show a variety of initiatives in policy, research and training regarding language in ECEC with a focus on early years professionals. The following section will give a brief overview of each of the contributions.

3 The contributions to this volume

The contributions in this special issue draw attention to early years professionals' linguistic competences, knowledge, beliefs and skills. In response to needs expressed by policy makers or early years professionals themselves (Van Gorp and Moons; Young) and the gaps assessed by standardized tests (Kuiken; Mroz and Letts) or in-depth qualitative analyses (Ofner and Thoma) the contributions present examples of good practice, details of local initiatives and national programmes to provide additional training and/or develop material for language support in ECEC. The texts have been ordered such that we start with those articles that review recent changes of policy and practice in light of European, national, regional and/or local initiatives and gradually shift towards texts that focus more on examples of good practice. As a whole, this special issue presents a journey through early years education in five countries with a variety of practical solutions to the unified challenges ECEC faces in twenty-first century plurilingual and multicultural Europe.

3.1 Working with super-diversity in Strasbourg pre-schools: Strengthening the role of teaching support staff

Young's study is situated in the highly multilingual and multicultural context of urban preschools in the city of Strasbourg, France. French ECEC institutions typically cater for children from three to six years old but also about 10% of two-year olds attend preschool. The text first describes the complex linguistic landscape in Strasbourg, a French city on the German border with Alsatian as a locally spoken language and large groups of immigrants from countries such as Turkey. The author continues with a sociolinguistic analysis of the discourse about language in the national and regional official documents, which reveals that, in contrast to the super-diverse linguistic reality, French policy tends to advocate a dominant francophone perspective.

Next Young reports on an innovative training programme for in-service nursery staff that was implemented to support early years educators when communicating with children (and parents) speaking French as an additional language. Using qualitative methods, the author demonstrates how a team of experienced teachers for children in multilingual contexts and academic experts of plurilingualism manage to engage nursery assistants (some of them of migrant origin) in a process of critical reflection to bring them from common naive daily practices and beliefs towards a greater understanding of the social, cultural and linguistic complexities surrounding children growing up with more than one language. It presents an

excellent example of how ECEC staff can be guided to become competent and empathetic when dealing with linguistic and cultural super-diversity.

3.2 Creating rich language environments for more than one language: A work in progress in Flemish childcare

Van Gorp and Moons' article reports on daycare centres for children aged 0 to 2;6 in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. The contribution focuses on the changing policy and practice of language support for young Dutch-as-a-second-language learners (DSLL).

First, the authors describe the complex political and highly diverse linguistic landscape of Belgium. One would expect its citizens to be multilingual or at least to have positive attitudes towards multilingualism. However, to the contrary, Flanders persistently advocates a monolingual self-concept and policy. Next, the authors present data from 2007 into the actual language practices of ECEC staff in the area surrounding the Belgian capital Brussels. Findings revealed that early years professionals found it very difficult to combine Dutch language stimulation with a positive attitude for the (mostly French) home language of the children. Based on their considered opinion that they are a vital source of Dutch for the DSLLs they take care of, they focused their efforts on a Dutch-only strategy. A follow-up study from 2011 yielded some changes in daily practice: more daycare centres favoured a pragmatic multilingual approach and staff seemed to combine Dutch and French more often. However, many early years professionals expressed a need for help in how to provide linguistic support effectively.

In the final section, the authors provide information about current initiatives that offer practical advice, specialized training and coaching as well as supportive material to early childhood educators.

3.3 Early years education, language and social background: A decade of changing policy and practice

Mroz and Letts take an educationalist perspective in their review of ECEC in the UK. The authors focus on the identification of children in need of language support during the so-called *Foundation Stage*, which addresses children from three to five years of age. This article is unique in this special issue as it emphasises the situation of children with specific language and communication needs (SLCN) – but deliberately excludes multilingual children.

The authors start with a report of a 2001 study into the knowledge of more than 800 early years professionals about language development and delay. Data revealed that most ECEC staff had only low levels of knowledge – a finding that was corroborated by very low scores on a test to identify children with SLCN. Mroz and Letts continue with a review of the manifold policy changes and initiatives that followed in the decade up to 2010 with the aim to create appropriate language support for children attending ECEC and to provide training for early years professionals.

Finally, the authors present results of a more recent study that investigated language skills of more than 1200 children in relation to socio-economic status (Letts et al. 2013). Results tentatively suggest that the role of SES decreases as children move through the nursery stage. Mroz and Letts interpret this as a first sign that the policy and curriculum changes have equipped ECEC staff with higher competences so that they can give better support to children in need.

3.4 Competencies of preschool educators in Amsterdam: A Dutch perspective on language proficiency, language targets and didactic skills

Kuiken draws on his expertise as advisor for the Dutch capital Amsterdam, a highly multicultural and multilingual urban context confronting early childcare with classrooms where at times all but a few children are L2 learners of Dutch. ECEC in the Netherlands addresses both children younger than four years in preschool and children in grade 1 and 2 of primary school.

The author presents an overview of Amsterdam policy efforts of the last ten years to provide language support for children in early years education. He shows how insufficient Dutch proficiency levels of the early years educators themselves may undermine these efforts. Due to earlier policy measures aiming to increase labour participation of migrant women a considerable percentage of Amsterdam ECEC staff are of non-Dutch origin. Results of Droge et al. (2009, 2010) into the speaking, reading and writing skills of more than 650 Amsterdam preschool teachers revealed that 50% did not reach the minimal level of B1/B2 proficiency (cf. Common European Framework of References). Educators, who had failed the tests, attended compulsory language training. This was a successful approach, as by the end of 2013 more than 80% of the 1665 tested preschool teachers had reached the required proficiency.

Kuiken then provides examples of how early childhood professionals receive support in creating effective language stimulating situations for the children in

need. He concludes that despite the new policy measures and some positive first effects, there is still a great deal of work for the future, in particular, regarding the education and knowledge base of ECEC staff about language development and support.

3.5 Early childhood educators' abilities in planning language learning environments

Ofner and Thoma provide a German view on ECEC – a service that typically provides care for children between three and five years old but includes about 25% of younger children (BMBF 2013). The authors present data on early childhood educators' competences to plan effective language training sessions for children aged between 2;6 and 6;6 years old.

First, the contribution sketches the growing expectations of parents and policy makers regarding the language training competence of early childhood educators. Earlier research within the project *SprachKoPF* showed that there is considerable variation among ECEC staff's knowledge and abilities (Michel et al. 2014). The present paper investigates whether high levels of knowledge go hand in hand with good practice. The authors performed a qualitative analysis of 15 early childhood educators' planning, practice and reflection about the practice concerning a specific language training session. They identified two types of planners: Elaborate planners show an awareness of long-term perspectives of their interventions and are focused on meeting and evaluating specific linguistic objectives. Restricted planners decide on a day-by-day basis on the content of their sessions and aim at generally promoting children's language development. Correlational analyses with *SprachKoPF*–scores suggest that ECEC staff with higher levels of knowledge more often belong to the group of elaborate planners.

Ofner and Thoma advocate the view that language support builds upon profound linguistic knowledge and skills of a caregiver. Their study provides evidence that pedagogical practice is indeed related to theoretical knowledge about child language development.

4 Conclusion

4.1 The diversity of ECEC in Europe mirrored in these contributions

As can be seen from the summaries of the studies presented in this issue there are many different ways of investigating the role of European ECEC professionals in relation to the language development of the children they take care of. This diversity is primarily based on one of the following four reasons:

First, great variation exists between and within national standards of European ECEC at the institutional level. The European Commission defines pre-primary education as "the initial stage of organised instruction [...] designed for children aged at least three years" (Eurostat 2012: 187). While this institutionalised ECEC is "usually integrated into structures forming part of the national education system [...] in many countries provision for younger children (up to age three) is subject to local variation" (Eurostat 2012: 30–31). Some of the research presented in this volume covers indeed preschool environments (playgroups, nurseries and kindergarten), which fall under local regulations and do not follow national curricula or standards.

Second, not least as a result of the institutional variation, the specific local context of early childhood education and care largely defines the nature of ECEC. For example, the needs of early years professionals in super-diverse urban centres challenged by emergent multilingualism and intercultural encounters on the one hand (Young; Van Gorp and Moons; Kuiken) are distinct from more general competences we may expect of ECEC staff such as knowing about global steps of mono- and bilingual language development in order to identify children in need of specialist help or to effectively plan and provide language support on the other hand (Mroz and Letts; Ofner and Thoma).

A third source of diversity is the training of ECEC staff, which differs a great deal among European countries and accordingly in the studies presented here. While European countries often require Bachelor degrees for the workforce in institutionalised ECEC settings (Eurostat 2012), the early years professionals who are the focus of some of the studies in this issue take care of very young children, are teaching assistants – as is the case of the French A.T.S.E.M. (Young) – or they have been trained in countries where the BA requirement does not hold (Kuiken; Ofner and Thoma). Consequently, those carers may only hold a vocational degree.

Finally, the diversity of the research presented here relates back to the different scientific and methodological approaches of the authors contributing to this volume. From a sociolinguistic point of view, Young analyses policy documents in

France and combines this with a qualitative review of a coaching programme for nursery teachers in the super-diverse urban context of Strasbourg. Van Gorp and Moons present data of quantitative surveys into early years professionals' practices as well as positive examples of supporting coaching initiatives in light of the highly complex, plurilingual and multicultural context of Belgium. Mroz and Letts adopt an educationalist perspective when they review quantitative survey results, policy documents and initiatives to provide language support to children in need. Kuiken describes the improvements of early years educators' own language skills in light of their initial and in-service training and supporting initiatives in the highly multilingual urban context of the Dutch capital Amsterdam. Ofner and Thoma present a qualitative analysis of early childhood educators' plans and practice regarding language training and relate these to scores on a quantitative tool to test the knowledge and skills of early years professionals in Germany.

As such, this issue mirrors the multiplicity of European policy and institutionalised measures as well as local initiatives and plans that aim at fostering child language development during ECEC. Similarly, expectations and training of early years professionals and the academic approaches to investigate this area vary considerably.

4.2 The unified challenges of ECEC in Europe mirrored in this special issue

It is important, however, to highlight the commonalities of the articles in this special issue. First, there seems to be a European trend that more children attend daycare from a young age which has generated an awareness of the need for qualitatively higher levels of early years education.

Second, as can be seen from the reviews of policy on language and education, the Council of Europe has finally acknowledged the pluri- and multilingual as well as intercultural repertoire of its citizens including the languages and varieties of migrant minorities. Not all member states of the EU have yet followed this example to the full extent. Similarly, some of the initiatives presented in this special issue focus on majority language support while home language support and positive attitudes towards plurilingualism are addressed implicitly, e.g., by targeting to increase the knowledge and skills of ECEC staff.

Third, the authors agree that language and the acquisition of academic language skills needed for successful education is a crucial aspect of early childhood development as it goes hand in hand with cognitive development and is a prerequisite for a successful entry to primary school and the further educational career.

Fourth, greater awareness of the diversity of languages in the European context, which particularly manifests itself in education and most significantly in early years education, has resulted in most European countries starting to invest large amounts of money into preschool programmes for young children. However, and this is demonstrated in all contributions to this issue: to date many national governments have ignored the growing needs of early childhood professionals in this respect (see Dickinson 2011 for a similar observation in the USA). By contrast, the contributions to this issue focus on the important role for child language development of ECEC staff.

4.3 Final remarks and outlook

In sum, the articles gathered in this special issue ask Europe to better equip early childhood professionals with knowledge and skills about child language development and about support for (multilingual) children in need. Across Europe, there seems to be a lack of attention to linguistic content and skills in the initial training of early childcare professionals. As long as early childhood educators for the youngest children have only to finish minimal levels of vocational training, it is not surprising that they (a) rely on intuitive and at times naive approaches to child language support, (b) unknowingly perform poorly when implementing programmes for language development with the risk of turning them ineffective and (c) sometimes even have adopted harmful practices with young language learners. As such, the articles in this special issue identify the needs of early years professionals. They also provide examples of good practice and effective materials. Finally, they formulate directions for future measures and developments.

At this stage, it seems imperative that Europe and its member states turn its attention towards early childhood educators and support them in their attempts to deal with the growing linguistic challenges and increasing expectations from parents and policy makers they are faced with. Not least, the articles presented in this issue call for a better initial education of early childhood practitioners and intensive coaching for in-service professionals – a request that seems to have reached stakeholders in Europe: "Overall, it can be noted that the minimum level of qualification required for becoming a pre-primary teacher has risen across Europe compared to 2006/07" (Eurostat 2012: 110–111).

To conclude, language at European institutions for early childhood education and care seems to have finally received the attention it needs. But there are still many more steps to take and questions to ask. For example, currently, we do not know much about the effectiveness of language programmes at preschool. Are there possibilities for content and language integrated learning for children from

birth to six years of age? What is, in all this, the role of parental stimulation, individual differences between children, and the specific social, political and educational context? The contributions to this special issue have taken the important step to put early years professionals in the spotlight. As suggested earlier, one of the most pressing challenges for language support during ECEC in Europe may be how best to enable early years institutions and professionals in particular to do both: support home language development and foster academic language acquisition in the schooling language. Given the low levels of education current ECEC professionals are required to attend in some European countries, this seems to be of particular urgency.

Overall the conclusion may be that the profession would benefit from early childhood educators who have gone through an education with a substantial component about language development of (multilingual) children and a thorough training in intercultural competence. To this end, with growing numbers of children attending early childhood education bringing diverse individual needs and backgrounds to the ECEC institution, the professionals deserve to be trained in meeting the requirements of these needs in 21st century super-diverse European society.

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